

Disclaimer: This is a machine generated PDF of selected content from our products. This functionality is provided solely for your convenience and is in no way intended to replace original scanned PDF. Neither Cengage Learning nor its licensors make any representations or warranties with respect to the machine generated PDF. The PDF is automatically generated "AS IS" and "AS AVAILABLE" and are not retained in our systems. CENGAGE LEARNING AND ITS LICENSORS SPECIFICALLY DISCLAIM ANY AND ALL EXPRESS OR IMPLIED WARRANTIES, INCLUDING WITHOUT LIMITATION, ANY WARRANTIES FOR AVAILABILITY, ACCURACY, TIMELINESS, COMPLETENESS, NON-INFRINGEMENT, MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE. Your use of the machine generated PDF is subject to all use restrictions contained in The Cengage Learning Subscription and License Agreement and/or the Gale Power Search Terms and Conditions and by using the machine generated PDF functionality you agree to forgo any and all claims against Cengage Learning or its licensors for your use of the machine generated PDF functionality and any output derived therefrom.

Mary Ellen Chase

Date: 1994

From: Dictionary of American Biography

Publisher: Gale

Document Type: Biography

Length: 1,095 words

Lexile Measure: 1340L

About this Person

Born: February 24, 1887 in Blue Hill, Maine, United States

Died: July 28, 1973 in Northampton, Massachusetts, United States

Nationality: American

Full Text:

Chase, Mary Ellen (Feb. 24, 1887 - July 28, 1973), author, educator, and lecturer, the second of the eight children of Edward Everett Chase, a lawyer and judge, and Edith Lord, a schoolteacher was born in Blue Hill, Maine, a maritime area where her ancestors had settled 200 years earlier. Her education began in a rural two-room school, where inadequate funds limited the school term to twenty-five weeks per year; she notes, however, that her mother, whom she describes as her first and best teacher, ably supplemented her children's instruction.

At age thirteen Chase entered Blue Hill Academy, a school with a predominantly classical curriculum and, upon graduation at seventeen, she enrolled in the University of Maine to major in Greek and history. In the spring of her sophomore year, responding to her father's insistence about the need for practical experience, she took a leave from her studies to teach three terms in rural schools and then returned to complete study for her bachelor's degree. Following her graduation in 1909, cum laude with Phi Beta Kappa membership, Chase taught various subjects in private boarding schools, first in Wisconsin and then in Chicago, until a prolonged illness necessitated a lengthy convalescence in Montana. Her decision to enroll in a graduate program in English came during the enforced idleness of this period, when her extensive reading resulted in a fascination for words and an intense desire to teach English prose rather than history.

With the attainment of her Ph.D. in 1922, she realized her wish when she became an assistant professor in the University of Minnesota's English Department, as well as an evening instructor in the Extension Division and a parttime instructor at the nearby College of St. Catherine. Her career as a lecturer also started at this time. Initially a source of supplemental income, her speaking assignments, which ranged from literary analyses for women's clubs to high school commencement addresses, became a source of pleasure, for Chase found enchantment in unfamiliar places and chance acquaintanceships. So greatly did she enjoy her lecture tours that she continued them throughout her professional life. In 1926, motivated partly by her wish to spend her days as a teacher in what she called her own part of the country, she accepted an invitation to join the faculty of Smith College, where she remained for twenty-nine years.

Chase did not marry; she devoted her life to study, teaching, and writing. Her dedication bore fruitful returns. As a teacher--she disliked the word "educator"--she not only achieved her personal goal of a full professorship, an uncommon accomplishment for a woman of that period, but also found complete satisfaction in her work. Smith College, she said, fulfilled all her expectations and desires; moreover, she regarded teaching English literature as "more fun to do than anything else in the world." That her classes consistently filled to capacity attests to her popularity as a teacher.

She also enjoyed success as a writer, whose diverse range of publications included *Thomas Hardy from Serial to Novel* (1927), an adaptation of her doctoral dissertation; an English textbook, *Constructive Theme Writing* (1957), designed to aid the college student in mastering what Chase called the "formidable problem" of learning to use language well; and several biblical analyses and interpretations, inspired by her teaching of courses in the literature of the Bible. Her intention in the first of these studies, *The Bible and the Common Reader* (1944), was to enhance reader enjoyment through a better understanding of the various literary forms of poetry and prose to be found in the Bible as a whole. The popularity of this work led to a sequel with a narrower focus, *Life and Language of the Old Testament* (1955); followed by *The Psalms for the Common Reader* (1962).

In addition to these scholarly works, Chase wrote numerous novels and autobiographical works. In one of the most appealing of the autobiographies, appropriately called *A Goodly Heritage* (1932), she fondly re-created the joyous days of simple pleasures during her childhood and early youth in a Maine seacoast town. She again recaptured the impressions of a child living in a distant,

uncomplicated era in the charming story *The White Gate* (1954).

The memories of the areas Chase loved so well as a child materialized as the settings of many of her novels. Her most impressive works, however, are those that chronicle the economic and cultural transformation of New England villages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought about by the decay of shipping activities and the intrusion of summer visitors. Her *Silas Crockett* (1935), for example, traces the fortunes of four generations of the seafaring Crockett family, from the prosperous days when Saturday Cove served as a vibrant shipbuilding center for the entire coast to its decline into a herring-packing factory town. The title figure of *Mary Peters* (1934) also lives through periods of upheaval and change. Although these stories reflect Chase's sadness concerning the decay of the maritime life of New England, she countered her disappointment by emphasizing the enduring heroism of those who survived the changes.

Though she is primarily remembered for regional fiction about the Maine seacoast and its inhabitants, Chase moved beyond the boundaries of Maine in a number of her works. The early part of *The Lovely Ambition* (1960) is set in rural England, another of her favorite places, which she again highlighted in *This England* (1936), a collection of delightful essays about her summer vacations abroad. In *A Journey to Boston* (1965) she wrote with warmth and admiration of a different type of New Englander, the hardworking Polish immigrant who had settled in the Connecticut River Valley, and she made a complete departure from her other works in the novella *Dawn in Lyonesse* (1938), a modern version of the Tristan and Isolde tale.

Whatever her subject or setting, however, Chase's enduring love of words emerges in vivid images and vibrant, gracefully flowing sentences. As for her characterizations, her own abiding affection for and intense interest in "all sorts of people" endows her fictional people with a refreshing, lifelike quality that has assured their timeless appeal.

For several years after her retirement from Smith in 1955, Chase maintained her active pace of life. She wrote several books, including three for children, and pursued her hobbies of bird-watching and gardening at Windswept, her summer home in Maine. She also traveled to England to study Hebrew at Cambridge University. Eventually, she was confined to a Northampton, Mass., nursing home where she spent the remainder of her life. She was buried in Blue Hills, Maine.

FURTHER READINGS:

[The most comprehensive account of Chase's professional life appears in the autobiographical *A Goodly Fellowship* (1939). Short biographical sketches are included in Max J. Herzberg, *The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature* (1962); and *American Women Writers*, vol. 1 (1979). An obituary appears in the *Springfield Union*, July 30, 1973.]

Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

"Mary Ellen Chase." *Dictionary of American Biography*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994. *Gale In Context: Biography*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BT2310016178/GPS?u=brun84057&sid=GPS&xid=23381f6c. Accessed 2 May 2021.

Gale Document Number: GALE|BT2310016178